



**Islamabad
Policy Institute**
Supporting Dialogue for Peace & Development

Hyper-nationalism in India
&
Indo-Pak Relations

Mobeen Jafar Mir



Hyper-nationalism in India & Indo-Pak Relations

**Mobeen Jafar Mir
June 16, 2021**

Hyper-nationalism in India & Indo-Pak Relations

By Mobeen Jafar Mir*

Introduction

The second consecutive victory of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the general election of 2019 was a successful culmination of a decades-long campaign to leverage Hindu nationalism in contemporary Indian political discourse. The democratic process has been used as a vehicle to achieve political objectives. In the run-up to the 2019 elections, the ruling BJP disseminated a planned narrative to dissuade the Indian populace, overwhelmingly comprising Hindus, and convinced them that the Indian National Congress (INC) was not a secular party and hence not a guarantor of secular India.

Long gone are the days when India's much-lauded character was its commitment to democratic ideals on the strength of its pronounced linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity. India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru along with his political party, the INC, was a staunch advocate of establishing a unique brand of Indian secularism which, in his firm conviction, could amalgamate the heterogeneous Indian populace. However, the ruling BJP has cast aside this historic narrative and come up with a new account that portrays India as a majoritarian nation-state of the Hindus.

The transformed domestic character of India and the rise of hyper-nationalism are influencing the foreign policy of India, particularly, towards arch-rival Pakistan. This is giving rise to new challenges for India-Pakistan relationship. It requires Pakistan to critically evaluate emerging trends in India, understand the direction India is headed towards, and chart a course for managing a difficult, yet important bilateral relationship.

This paper is an effort in this direction. It analyses the phenomena of hyper-nationalism and evaluates strategies adopted by the BJP to dominate the political landscape. From there, the paper also examines the impact of hyper-nationalist discourse on India's Pakistan policy. Finally, the paper explores the options available for Pakistan to respond to the new trends in Indian polity.

What is Hyper-nationalism?

Hyper nationalism is a political phenomenon that takes place when a particular community or a group attaches excessive feeling of belonging to a nation and territory that in turn, persuades it to channel this feeling on a mass scale through an organised political party or parties under an

increasingly unitary political system. The word in itself is built upon the idea of nationhood and it directs towards the formation of a particular identity. The evolution of the concept of ‘Us vs. Them’ is a direct outcome of the rampant hyper-nationalistic tendencies in different parts of the world. In essence, hyper-nationalism is an extreme form of nationalism, where the focus is on preserving the nation's culture and its national identity by enforcing and demanding absolute support from the populace to an absolute leader, promoting an extreme sense of pride in one's country, upholding common characteristics like race, religious or political ideologies.

Hyper-nationalism manifests itself by threatening dissenting voices and leveraging legal tools and force to clamp down on any criticism directed against the government with nationalist inclinations. It also interferes with the political and cultural landscapes and taints them with its self-righteous fervour. The tide of hyper-nationalism does not appreciate any engagement that is deemed contrary to the interests or agendas of the ruling party. The essence of this phenomenon lies in marshalling the down-trodden and poorer sections of societies against established institutions of the state. It is important to notice that it takes place under the charismatic leader who psychologically controls the aspirations of the masses. There has been a dramatic rise in the number of right-wing political parties in Latin America, North America, Europe, and Asia.

Hyper-nationalism in India:

The recent tide of populism and hyper-nationalism in India can be traced back to the time when the Sangh Parivar, an umbrella term primarily used for the Hindu nationalist organisations, was backed, strengthened, and burgeoned by the members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the 1960s. Members of the RSS have passionately remained affiliated with the rejuvenation of Hindu nationalism in India. The Sangh Parivar's founding father V.D. Savarkar vehemently believed that Muslims and Christians were foreigners to Indian land as their *punyabhū* (sacred lands) were not present inside India even if they claimed to be having associations with *pitribhū* (fatherland) in India. The seeds of discord were sown whose repercussions in the form of underlying hostility and sheer absence of acceptance granted to the Muslims and the Christians of India remain one of the most controversial and divisive legacies in the living memory of Indian history.

Under Prime Minister Modi-led BJP Hindu-nationalist government, hyper-nationalism is manifesting through a process of othering, fueling a sense of insecurity in policy and practice for non-Hindus and implementation of reactionary policies. Meanwhile, in India, the word ‘secularism’ has explicitly disappeared from the political lexicon of India.

Consequently, the process of internal polarization of India with a negative spillover impact on the foreign policy approaches towards Pakistan is underway. It will embolden the ruling party to go ahead with highly emotive and reactionary policies, in turn, throwing up new challenges for Pakistan. Reconciliation efforts will mostly be overlooked as it would add a much-needed impetus to their Hindu-nationalist rhetoric and strengthen their position at home.

Leveraging Tools of Hyper-Nationalism by BJP

The emergence of Narendra Modi on the scene of national politics of India has moved the nature of nationalism to hyper-nationalism. It was inculcated in the minds of the ordinary citizens of India that the Congress party worked towards strengthening casteism, regionalism, and ensuring the interests of the Indian Muslims while neglecting a vast majority of ordinary Hindus constituting a larger section of the Indian population. Post-independence, two distinct visions to deal with the issue of religion in India emerged: Hindu nationalism and Hindu traditionalism. The Hindu nationalists believed that India was a nation for the Hindus and Hinduism should be declared state religion. The Hindu traditionalists, like Jawaharlal Nehru and B. R. Ambedkar, favoured a composite culture called secularism. The present ruling party BJP, a Hindu nationalist party, in its successive electoral campaigns accused the Congress party of harming the interests of Indian Hindus under the guise of secularism.

BJP leveraged Congress' failure to deliver in the economic domain. The BJP promised that 'when we come to power, we will work on a developmental model, on the lines of Gujarat, which will be all-inclusive'.¹ The Congress is perceived as a party of the upper-caste Hindus and working for the solidarity of the Brahmin community, though it is a half-baked truth as the BJP received more upper-caste votes than any other political party in the general election of 2019. The BJP provoked Hindu nationalism by depicting Congress as an anti-Hindu party. This frenzy to whip up nationalist sentiments in India, in addition to highlighting a hypocritical behaviour of the Congress party, largely revolves around Pakistan, Muslims and Dalits, and some universities. The BJP's failure in the realm of governance and economy has forced its leaders to divert the attention of the poorer sections of the Indian society to Jawaharlal Nehru's "mistakes", by for instance reiterating time and again how Nehru's legacies, like granting a separate status to Kashmir, his negligence leading to Syama Prasad Mukherjee's death, a political leader who opposed the Nehru-Liaquat pact, and other measures resulting in 21 month Emergency lasting 1975-77 to anti-

¹ Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, "Are we turning into a nation of hyper-nationalists?," *The Hindu*, August 20, 2017, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/are-we-turning-into-a-nation-of-hyper-nationalists/article18701484.ece>.

Sikh riots established the rule of the *naamdars* (dynasts). The purpose of this narrative is to convince the public that things could have been better if Vallabhbhai Patel had been the first Prime Minister of India.

The state machinery controlled by the BJP has also backed Hindu nationalism through a well thought out strategy of promoting divisive culture. To appease the Hindus, the BJP has gone an extra mile to prove that the cow is Bharat Mata and anyone daring to eat beef is liable to be called an anti-national. A government notification titled, Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Regulation of Livestock Markets) Rules, 2017, states that all beef-eaters should be taken as being anti-nationals.² It is a pertinent example of hyper-nationalism flourishing under the guise of food culture. Muslims, Dalits/Adivasis, and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) would be at higher risk. This instance provides a glimpse into the hostile environment where the central government of India is stoking up the fire of communalism in the country.

The Hindu nationalists chided the Muslims of India as *Babur ki aulad* (children of the Mughal emperor Babur) and the Christians were lambasted and suppressed for their involvement in a painful campaign of “harvesting of souls” through conversions of the Hindus into Christianity. In the aftermath of 2014, the year when the ruling BJP consolidated its grip on the political discourse in New Delhi, frightening mob violence has gripped the entire country. The Muslims are attacked and assailed even after saying, “*Jai Shri Ram*”, which has lately become a litmus test, like “*Bharat Mata ki Jai*”, to prove one’s patriotic credentials.

Hypernationalism dictating India’s Pakistan policy

Having achieved its goal of taking control of New Delhi through fanning of communal tensions, the ruling BJP turned its focus towards employing an anti-Pakistan narrative. Declaring Pakistan an enemy appears lucrative in terms of maximising the vote bank. It provides a sense of unity and a means to dominate the domestic discourse leaving little choice for the opposition but to support the political agenda set by ideologues of Hindu-nationalism. For Pakistan, consequently, the posture adopted by the ruling BJP is more hostile. BJP government has changed the status of the disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir, enacted anti-Muslim laws, and undertaken attacks inside Pakistan’s territory in violation of Pakistan’s territorial sovereignty.

Meanwhile, to cover up its governance deficiencies, the BJP government embarked on an unending campaign of highlighting Pakistan as a state-sponsor of terrorism and blaming it for unrest in the region. New Delhi sought to isolate Pakistan, regionally and internationally.

² Ibid.

Presently, India is putting pressure on Pakistan through lobbying at the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). The continuous presence of Pakistan in FATF's grey list helps the ruling BJP to boast about the dividends of its anti-Pakistan posture. The anti-Pakistan narrative generated by the ruling BJP is largely used to deflect attention from the poor governance and comes in handy to inspire Hindu nationalism into the formation of a common force against Pakistan. BJP's excessive use of nationalistic card has its own limitations as a leading Indian economist and author, Arun Shourie, termed it a 'one-trick pony'. This rhetoric is then followed up by hostile actions. Therefore, there will always be a lingering possibility of Modi-led administration may then resort to launching the Balakot-like strikes against Pakistan or may intensify the operations along the Line of Control (LoC).

The vision of *ek vidhan, ek nishan, ek pradhan* (one Constitution, one symbol and one leader) is shaping a new reality in new India,³ but it is more discriminately attacking Muslim identity and, for that reason, Pakistan should expect an aggressive attitude towards it from India under the ruling BJP.

Pakistan's Response to Indian Hyper-nationalism

The wave of hyper-nationalism in India poses security challenges to Pakistan and Muslims in India, as it is more anti-Muslim than it is directed so explicitly towards any other religion. Though the BJP's actions of stripping Jammu and Kashmir of its special status internationalized the Kashmir dispute and provided a golden opportunity to Islamabad to highlight Indian atrocities and sponsoring of terrorism in various parts of Pakistan, the the opportunity was not availed in an effective way. For this, following measures are suggested to Pakistani policy-makers:

- 1) On the international level, Pakistan should continually expose the Hindutva designs of the BJP-led government of India. EU DisinfoLab's investigation has revealed how India has been falsely promoting anti-Pakistan narratives all across the world.
- 2) Pakistan should formulate a clear understanding of the new Hindutva-motivated Indian government and change in India's traditional foreign policy discourse on J&K. The strategic space provided to Pakistan from the follies of the incumbent government of India should not be wasted.

³ "One Nation, One Constitution, One Flag: Scrapping Articles 370, 35A Brings Jammu and Kashmir at Par with India – the Big Implications," *The Financial Express* (blog), August 5, 2019, <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/one-nation-one-constitution-one-flag-scrapping-articles-370-35a-brings-jammu-and-kashmir-at-par-with-india-the-big-implications/1666724/>.

- 3) Pakistan Missions abroad should be directed to pursue proactive engagement with media, think-tanks, academia, and universities for spreading Pakistan's viewpoint on India-Pakistan relations and peace and security in South Asia.
- 4) The federal government and opposition should formulate a consensus foreign policy on the issue of Jammu and Kashmir and engage in a lawfare to expose the BJP and RSS through legal means.
- 5) Islamabad should engage China on 'Peace and Security in South Asia'. Enhanced engagement of China in South Asia will balance India's outsized presence and influence.
- 6) Pakistan should pre-condition any talks and dialogue with India on New Delhi taking steps to reverse its unilateral steps regarding Jammu and Kashmir. India will, otherwise, use the bogey of talks to gain legitimacy for its illegal actions in occupied Kashmir.
- 7) Pakistan needs to pursue political stability and inclusion of marginalized segments into the decision-making processes to present a credible alternate image to India.

**Mobeen Jafar Mir is a researcher at Islamabad Policy Institute.*